

Voice-Over

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Whether in narrative films, documentaries, essay films, or experimental works, in what ways can voice-over be employed? What kinds of relationships can it establish with the image? And what textures or structural elements does voice-over itself bring to cinema?

In February 2023, my new film *That Day, on the River* 发光的河 (2023) was selected for the Berlinale Forum. That same year, I was invited by Berlinale programmer James Lattimer to write on the theme of ‘voice-over’, titled ‘Short Text on Voiceover for Berlinale Forum’ and published on the festival’s website. Ten fellow directors—including Radu Jude, Vincent Dieutre, and Burak Çevik—also contributed. The website’s introduction describes the project thus:

Many films in our programmes explore the possibilities of the voiceover. We asked filmmakers who screened at recent editions of the Forum and Forum Expanded to write about this cinematographic technique, with their answers running the full gamut from the analytical to the personal, from the general to the specific and from the lyrical to the concrete – each text the product of a unique voice.

Although all ten texts circle the theme of ‘voice-over’, their collective shape is neither an anthology of essays nor a rational, hierarchical argument. As I read each piece, I envisioned a pick-up-sticks 挑竹签游戏 structure—an abstract pattern reminiscent of Wassily Kandinsky’s paintings. If ‘voice-over’ is a slice of buttercream cake, each director wields a fruit knife at a different angle: some cuts are sharp, some gentle, and some barely brush the surface to lift a smear of cream. It is precisely through these varied slices that we can more effectively discuss the complexity of voice-over as a cinematic technique. This article’s aim, then, is to weave together these distinct voices and propositions, inviting further dialogue from readers.

I

We can begin our discussion of voice-over with Burak Çevik’s contribution. In the opening paragraph of his ‘Short Text on Voiceover’, Çevik writes:

The separation of sound from image is an important cinematographic idea, says Deleuze. He then gives an example from one of Straub-Huillet’s films. For the eyes which see it, a plain is just an empty space. But when a voice from above describes the dead lying beneath the plain, the meaning of the landscape changes dramatically.

Çevik goes on to explain that he first read these words ten years ago, at a time when he neither understood Deleuze’s philosophy nor had seen the Straub-Huillet film in question. Yet the idea of separating sound from image sparked something profound in this young filmmaker. In an age when DV cameras and modern digital recorders render synched sound the default, the deliberate uncoupling of sound and image still holds the power to transform. ‘I was wondering what a cinematographic idea even was’, Çevik admits.

Çevik's decade-old wonder provides a fitting point of departure for our own inquiry: what binds sound and image so tightly in cinema today? In the silent era, an audience might hear the projector's mechanical whir, the halting accompaniment of a live band, or the intertitles read aloud by a *benshi*—none truly synchronized (or at best simulating sync). As technology advanced, synchronous sound became both an aesthetic ideal and a technical standard—though some filmmakers even resisted the advent of sound altogether. This standard emerged alongside the growth, even the bloat, of the film industry: 'No longer may audiences languish,' the new 'cinema' seemed to declare; 'I'm no longer a circus attraction or mechanical racket—behold the magician, the sorcerer! Worship this illusion in earnest!'

Vincent Dieutre echoes this dynamic in his essay:

For a long time, I wondered what a clapperboard was for. In the era of analogue film, where I first discovered shooting and then editing film (still on a cutting table in those days) back in film school, I realised that the sacrosanct clapperboard was a guarantee of synchronised sound and image, a sort of fetish of verisimilitude, as well as a summary command issued to the viewer: to accept the veracity of the filmic representation, to go along with the fiction, to believe in it.

Dieutre refers to the pre-digital era of filmmaking, where the illusion of synchronised sound and image was sacrosanct, even able to 'command' the audience. One can imagine that, for viewers at the time, cinema's reproduction of reality must have been a spectacle of desire, a 'fetish of verisimilitude' or 'worship of authenticity', which certain directors or the film industry were all too happy to exploit and to perpetuate. Like sorcerers, they wove their ghost stories around a bonfire, using massive projections, dense herbal smoke, and the clash of bones to plant an emotion, a narrative, into the audience's mind. Because of sync sound and image, cinema audiences danced around that bonfire of 'worship of authenticity' as if entranced.

It is worth noting that the terms 'worship' or 'fetish' are not used here pejoratively, nor do they carry positive or negative value judgments. In fact, this is Dieutre's reflection on the relationship between cinema and its spectators in a bygone era. In a time of scarce images, people were mesmerised by cinema's capacity to reproduce the world, and they were eager to believe—or at least to understand more easily—the information cinema conveyed.

I also mentioned an example in my 'Short Text on Voiceover':

In the early years of the People's Republic of China, rural projectionists would bring educational films on agricultural techniques or newsreel footage to the countryside. Before screening the film, the projectionist would show static lantern slides while performing *kuaiban* 快板 rhythm storytelling to explain the slide content. On the one hand, the *kuaiban* narration greatly enhanced the propaganda's impact; on the other hand, the off-screen voiceover conferred a sense of 'authority' or 'discursive power', guiding viewers to interpret the images—and even prescribing the emotional response appropriate to those images (*kuaiban* and other Chinese folk art forms made dry, dull educational slides feel lively and engaging).

My passage here, alongside Dieutre's 'sacrosanct clapperboard', both discuss how, in the pre-digital era, cinema used sync sound and image to establish a certain authority. The 'veracity of cinematic representation' built the stage for narrative, and through spectacle and illusion, voiceover completed the story.

II

In the foregoing, we have emphasized people's fascination with spectacle and their acquiescence to cinema's 'veracity'. Of course, the movie theater is not a simple visual model. Returning to Dieutre's words, he says:

But the sound re-recording process (as systematically practised by auteurs like Bresson) used for 'international versions' and dubbed commercial movies posed a challenge to this willing suspension of disbelief. The elements of sound captured in passing in direct cinema, *cinéma vérité* and underground films and the advent of video (which is synchronised by definition) all conspired to relegate sync sound to the rank of an outmoded special effect.

It is fascinating that Dieutre points out that, with technological development, the collapse of a certain 'spectacle' has sparked a revolt against that 'willing suspension'. As eras changed, the power of illusion weakened—or simply ceased to work. Dieutre then refers to Philippe Garrel's 1985 film *She Spent So Many Hours Under the Sun Lamps*, asking: with its ambient noise, indistinct dialogue, and jarring close-ups, do we still believe in cinema's wonder? Perhaps, as Dieutre says: 'Believing... Deep down, nobody believed anymore. The world had already been filmed.'

Indeed, today the world is saturated with images—Erik Kessels's renowned project *24HRS in Photos* has already reminded us of this. We can glimpse that, in the 1980s, the emergence of video and television dealt a massive blow to cinema's authority, or its 'hegemonic illusion.' Audiences no longer needed to go to theatres to indulge in 'worship of veracity'; they could stay home, switch on the TV, insert a videotape. The consumption of images became effortless, and authenticity readily at hand. It must also be noted that, beyond technological upheaval, the spirit of the era—people's defiance of authority and their fervent desire for freedom of expression—was even more intense.

So, in this context, can cinema remain untouched? Radical artists likewise raised their cameras like clenched fists, rebelling against stale modes of expression and avidly tearing apart the 'illusion' woven by sound and image. Dieutre then highlights several directors' contributions to this process: Marguerite Duras and Chantal Akerman, who boldly posed the question: '[This process]...had already ushered in a far more open-ended narrative relationship between image and sound, between what is said (or left unsaid) and what is shown.' And Burak Çevik—whom Deleuze inspired earlier—emphasizes his own pursuit in the 'Short Text on Voiceover': the convergence and divergence of image and sound. He writes: 'In my films, the sound sometimes rises to the sky, sometimes goes underground, sometimes surrenders itself to silence.' To my mind, voiceover's peregrinations—the rupturing and the open narrative relationships—transform cinema from a flat tale or a sorcerer's campfire projection into a three-dimensional edifice, a courtyard or a castle through which audiences truly stroll.

By coincidence, in 2023, after returning to Beijing from Berlin, the China Film Archive hosted a Chantal Akerman retrospective. I watched Akerman's *News from Home* (1976) on the big screen for the first time—an

outstanding experience (previously, I had dozed off watching it on a small monitor). The cityscapes of New York, the grain of the film stock, the intertitles drawn from Akerman's mother's letters, the subway's low rumble, the whispers and clamour of pedestrians—all floated like scattered beams suspended in the theatre, building and assembling into a volumetric narrative space. Especially in the film's latter half, when the mother's voice-over is entirely drowned by New York's street noise—voice-over disappears! It surrenders itself to silence. Yet for audiences, this poses no issue: we remain buoyant in the director's constructed, dimensional narrative world.

The disappearance of voice-over—or the interruption of the mother's 'voice-over'—I employed a similar treatment in my 2019 feature *Breathless Animals* 动物方言 . I wrote in my 'Short Text on Voiceover':

The narration in *Breathless Animals* is a dialogue between my mother and me. In the course of making the film, I edited the interview recordings to be extremely discontinuous—fragmented, choppy. The voice-over often cannot complete a full narrative, lacking complete dialogue, replaced instead by words or short phrases. Or at certain moments, a nascent narrative logic established by the voice-over is interrupted by noise... 'Tedious family chatter seems rather pointless'; 'Don't trust everything you hear in the film.'

In truth, when I wrote these words, there was no disrespect toward my mother. On the contrary, I delight in her ramblings, and I am pleased to have invited her into my film. The question is: do I have the right to immerse everyone in such private emotion? Each person has their own family, their own stories, their own endless conversations with relatives. As a director, do I possess the privilege to project private feeling to the scale of the screen, forcing this emotion's particularity and demanding audience empathy? I imagine viewers' response to the voice-over would be something like: 'Tedious family chatter seems rather pointless.'

So, what might be engaging and interesting?

Cinema—ah, let us not forget that we are watching a film. I believe those discontinuous, choppy voice-overs aim to free the audience from mawkish, superficial sentiment. Seated in theatre seats, facing the screen, we realize: ah, we are indeed watching a movie. This brings to mind Jean-Luc Godard's *Sauve qui peut (la vie)* (1980): when the young heroine pedals toward the camera along a mountain path, the lilting music and postcard-perfect scenery easily sweep audiences into a clichéd emotion—one rooted in our lived experience or endlessly reinforced. Yet Godard will not let this pass: his constant use of freeze-frames, slow motion, reverse motion, and frame-by-frame shots shatters the film's 'illusion', forcing the audience back into their seats, reminding them: 'Hey, you are watching a movie!'

I can picture a curious scene: sitting shoulder to shoulder with Godard in a rural village in the early People's Republic China, watching an agricultural science-education film. The French speaker understands no Chinese, and we're too lazy to translate, so we stand and wander: peering at the farmers' crops, hearing cicadas, watching fireflies. The educational film becomes a glowing rectangle in the distance; then the projectionist's kuaiban narration crackles to life, and we are drawn—staggering—back to that rectangle. In this process, voice-over vanishes, the illusion dissolves—but the cinema remains beautiful, does it not?

III

Dieutre writes, ‘Forget the explanatory commentary, the use of the voiceover as an extra narrative tool in documentaries.’ Echoing this, I wrote in my ‘Short Text on Voiceover’:

It seems that I would prefer to make the audience question the content of the voiceover and eliminate the authority or discourse it brings. On the one hand, our access to spectacle is too straightforward in our daily life and on social media, and the audience does not need a voiceover as a guide to help understand these images.

Similar to the narration in *News from Home*, Dieutre describes his approach in *Bonne Nouvelle* (2001):

To film my titular neighbourhood in Paris in *Bonne Nouvelle* and populate it with people I’d met or loved, with stories told by my voice – and sometimes contradicted by the voices of two others, friends. The point is not to cheat, but to strive for a kind of truthfulness.

Here, Dieutre strengthens the open narrative relationship between the film image and the film sound. Impromptu voiceovers and contradictory stories miraculously generate a certain truthfulness. I love this idea: it marks a stage in the people’s revolt against the earlier ‘worship of veracity’. This means that truth no longer arises from cinema’s ‘illusion’ but from each viewer’s independent reflection. Seated in a theatre, pushed back into their seats by the split of sound and image, the hum of the air conditioner, the projector’s roar, and even the coughs of their neighbours—while also reading their own life backgrounds and private memories—viewers arrive, at a certain moment during the screening, at an awareness of truthfulness, thus pulling the magician off their pedestal.

As Dieutre says:

I now know that this art of collage, these multi-layered films, invite viewers to embark on a sort of archaeological dig, to dig deep into their own experience, beneath the shots and the words. And I know that they’ll be able to relate to this strange exercise in freedom, which is denied them by most mainstream movies.

I have quoted Dieutre at length (perhaps too much) because we both cherish the art of collage as directors or artists—we find freedom and liberation in it. At the entrance to the Tate’s Collage Gallery, a wall text reads, ‘Combining everyday objects and materials became a new technique for twentieth-century artists... Some continue to use this approach to create moments of poetic surprise. For others, collage is a way to analyse the images in advertising and mass media that surround us.’ When filmmakers splice together materials from diverse sources, the audience—like visitors wandering a gallery—lingers over the torn edges of collage works, the images partially covered or ripped away, the wrinkles and scratches of ready-made objects, even the dust on the frames or the patterned tiles of the gallery floor. Viewers ask themselves: what does that newspaper clipping, candy wrapper, sheet music, or torn advertisement fragment mean? How did a discarded food wrapper end up framed as art? In this process of ‘digging deep’, genuine dialogue and resonance emerge.

Moreover, Dieutre’s phrase ‘this art of collage, these multi-layered films’ highlights a method fundamentally

unlike mainstream cinema: there are no fixed stages of preproduction, production, and postproduction; everything unfolds like fragmented musical movements, or the shuffled letters in *Hill of Freedom*, with the director leaping and looping along the timeline. For example, regarding Dieutre's film *This Is the End* (2023), he writes: 'Producing drafts of a script one day at a time, we edited it, chopped it up and scattered the pieces all over the City of Angels. A definitive version wasn't recorded till the end, between the editing and the sound mixing.' Such a vivid process must be dangerous, improvised, teetering on chaos, driving one mad—and yet capable of producing a unique form of 'pure contemporary poetry. I thought of a conversation a few months ago with film scholar Yu Tianqi 余天琦 about her new book *Essay Film and Narrative Techniques*.¹ When she asked me about the 'improvisational' element in *Breathless Animals*, whether this seemingly free-flowing narrative contained the director's self-expression, I replied:

My process had no clear purpose or fixed plan; I only had a vague direction. As materials emerged, I continually reshaped the work or introduced new elements. The process was improvised and casual, full of surprises. The surprises lay in the layering and collage of materials: these often produced a kind of chemical effect, the distance between materials creating space for interpretation or moments of poetry. And these are precisely the most wonderful parts of cinema.

I do not want the director to monopolize discursive power, to endlessly guide the audience and keep them immersed in the 'illusion' (though for some commercial films, the illusion is indeed necessary). On the contrary, I hope director and audience engage in an equal dialogue, with randomness, uncontrollable overlaps, and collages laid bare before both. On this improvisational journey, viewers can discuss the meaning of the images alongside the director, forming their own independent views and insights.

Thus, within the cinema—this fleeting contemporary community—Dieutre's contemporary poetry takes effect, because neither side is hypnotized nor triumphant. Instead, a public discussion of the image unfolds, echoing the classical 'piazza', where people speak freely and listen. We step out of the 'black mirror' of electronic screens, shed narcissism or self-pity, share, converse, coexist, and share time. This may be the most wonderful moment in the contemporary cinema.

IV

The essay so far seems to have become a utopian journey through cinema. I must remind myself that we have been emphasizing the separation of sound and image—and the ambiguous beauty it brings—but might we now be plunging into another kind of void?

If the illusion of synchronised sound and image utterly collapses, and the elements on the editing timeline scatter like a hundred marbles on the floor—bouncing, colliding, rolling, hiding at random—does that alone yield truthfulness? Will it provoke audience interaction, rolling up their sleeves for an archaeological dig? Or might viewers feel the director is even more arrogant, merely posturing? Sometimes the surprise and poetry of collage blur into incoherence and disarray. If we slip to the other end of the scale, we face the same embarrassment of a director talking only to himself and rationalizing his own choices.

In response, Romanian director Radu Jude responds in his 'Short Text on Voiceover' with two quotations.

The first, from Jacques Rivette (1973): ‘I think that’s the basis for everything: to treat the text as material which plays a role exactly similar to the other materials in the film: the actors’ faces, their gestures, the photographic texture.’ The second, from Hito Steyerl (2011): ‘The essay films now look amazingly similar [...] to a zapping spree with a voiceover, or maybe just to a Sunday afternoon remix contest on YouTube.’ Placed side by side, these wry remarks float like the devil and angel on a character’s shoulders, reminding us to re-think the topic of ‘voice-over’.

I sometimes fall into simplistic binaries—‘compliance’, ‘resistance’, ‘turning’, ‘sacrosanct’ (perhaps an artifact of translation software)—terms that reduce complexity, linearize cinema’s history, and pigeonhole different directors’ rich explorations into a taxonomic chart. Clearly, this is crude. In ‘Short Text on Voiceover’, each filmmaker speaks from their feeling; their words are a single drop of rain, a spoonful of water against the ocean of cinema. There is no universal formula or essay that applies everywhere. In filmmaking and through each technical revolution, we constantly encounter new questions and challenges.

At the end of his entry, Jude writes:

I think that the space between these two quotations contains all the problems we have regarding the use of voiceover in the cinema of today. I cannot add anything more, I don’t know what else to add, I prefer to let you reflect on them. (And if anyone feels this is not enough, they can just imagine I added 4’33” by John Cage to the text instead of my voiceover.)

Jude’s silence—his invocation of 4’33”—brings to mind James Benning’s new film *Allensworth* (2023), screened in the Berlinale Forum this year. Benning, my colleague at CalArts’s Film & Video School, composes his films from long static shots—*Ten Skies* (2004) or *13 Lakes* (2006). As the *Artforum* website notes: ‘For fifty years, Benning has documented U.S. hegemony and resistance through a masterful manipulation of light and time, giving unconventional form to histories of colonization, racial violence, land use, and alienation.’ It is known that Benning’s films are almost entirely voice-over free; we hear only wind, highway noise, insects, or the faint rustle of leaves.

We won’t delve into academic studies of his work here; I mention him because watching his films is a uniquely ‘fun’ experience. Years ago at L.A.’s REDCAT theatre, during a screening of *Ten Skies*, roughly an hour in, a student could no longer contain himself and shouted, ‘This is the same damn cloud!’ before storming out. Only at the end did Benning slowly approach the screen and croak, ‘Okay, it isn’t the same cloud.’ The audience roared with laughter—perhaps the only voice-over of that screening. This year I also watched *Allensworth* at Berlinale. If Benning’s film addresses colonial issues or racial violence, it does so through silence and duration. In that theatre (with horribly uncomfortable seats), we were forced to stare at a few buildings in *Allensworth* for tens of minutes, unable to leave without climbing over dozens of people. I did not feel Dieutre’s ‘invitation to an archaeological dig’, but rather a near-violent nailing of us to our seats. Perhaps this most coercive mode of cinematic viewing precisely embodies Benning’s filmic vision.

V

Whether it’s Radu Jude’s quotations, John Cage’s 4’33”, or James Benning’s *Ten Skies*, filmmakers—like historians or scientists—can of course forge new insights and tell new stories. Yet in my practice I often

engage in self-reflection (as Jude tells us: ‘reflect on them yourselves!’) and remain wary that directing is a profession armed with ‘dangerous weapons.’ Cinema—this art medium—carries a strong gene of ‘sorcery’, or the ‘illusion’ we mentioned at the essay’s outset. When sound and image lock in sync, the theatre environment can confer a performative authenticity that leads audiences to readily accept certain viewpoints or claims. We can be moved to tears, elated, or overwhelmed with emotion in a cinema, and thus all too easily believe in those so-called ‘director’s expressions’—a form of violence that frightens me.

On one hand, technological revolutions and shifting media have caused the theatre’s spectacle to begin collapsing; on the other, as noted above, audiences have begun resisting that ‘willing suspension’. Contemporary cinema is nothing like its analogue predecessor. Hence, in my filmmaking I strive not to present conclusions but to pose questions, ultimately handing over to viewers the right to find answers and to imagine. A director cannot—and should not—supplant the audience’s own thinking.

Here, I quote Dieutre once more:

We discovered that we could regain control over the infinite power of cinema, renegotiate the willing suspension of disbelief with the audience, although I still had to find my voice... Poetry, literature, the so-called fine arts had long since jumped on the bandwagon, but the commercial interests at stake and the movie industry’s enormous machinery for spectacle were not about to take it lying down. We had to sneak in and find the cracks. At the time, we spoke of Third cinema or creative documentaries. But our lethal weapon was the voice. My voice.

‘My voice’—these two words slow me as I read. I suddenly realize that whenever we watch a film (especially when reading intertitles), there is always a ‘my voice’ echoing in our skulls—a narrator inside us, sometimes incessant, even luring us into dreams. Yet in the face of the movie industry’s grand spectacle machine, our voice is silenced, covered over. (A wordplay: is this the commercial ‘loss of self’ effect in cinema—to forget ‘my voice’, to ‘forget my off-screen voice’, or to be left ‘speechless’ by a film’s effects and AI imagery? The voiceover’s mouth leads to the voiceover’s speechlessness.)

Perhaps my emphasis on ‘my own voice’ misreads Dieutre’s manifesto-like words, his sloganic force; his original intent springs from the director’s creative act. Yet this ambiguity also feels fitting. I care little whether a filmmaker forms new insights or tells new stories, because each screening is new, each voice different (*Ten Skies* offers a different feeling every time—no two clouds are alike). ‘My voice’ does not appear in the technical process of modern voice-over production, for it transcends a film’s runtime and the theatre’s space—yet undeniably it exists in every viewer’s mind (right now, as you read). Just as in Akerman’s *News from Home*, when off-screen narration falls silent, ‘my voice’ seems to emerge, and Akerman’s story becomes ours.

Could we then say that cinema is ‘our story’? Dieutre’s ‘Short Text on Voiceover’ bears the title *THIS IS THE END: Finding Your Voice Again*. Perhaps these very words should serve as our conclusion: ultimately, may each of us reclaim our own voice through film.

Notes

1 Interview with Yu Tianqi on *Essay Film and Narrative Techniques*, August 21, 2023, via email.